THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT CHOICES

August 27, 2000

John M. Buchanan

We all have to be born again, not once but many times, if we are to enter the kingdom. This deep longing for growth was and is the central force of the Christian pilgrimage. The Christian is always being born anew. The pressure to grow is inherent and yet we fight it . . . .There is a self within each of us aching to be born, a self burdened with contradiction, and everything we do is disguised to alleviate the discomfort caused by the contrary forces within us. We, like the heroes of old, have to enter a mythological cycle of descent and return, death and resurrection.

Alan Jones
The Journey Beckons: Reflections on the Way of the Cross

FOURTH
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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CHOICES
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Joshua 24: 1-2, 14-18
John 6: 56-69

"Choose this day whom you will serve." (Joshua 24:15) NRSV

Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our minds and hearts to your presence in our lives. Silence in us any voice but yours, so that we may hear your call. And then give us courage to respond in faith and trust and in love for our neighbors, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

I continue to be startled by the truth that leaps out of the Bible, even from passages we know by heart, even from passages that are enigmatic and difficult.

The New Testament lesson this morning, the passage we just read, is difficult. Jesus has just fed a large crowd of followers with a few loaves and fish and so people have continued to follow—looking for more food. Jesus, however, begins to talk metaphorically about "Bread from Heaven." "I am the bread of life," he says, "whoever comes to me will never be hungry." And then, he goes deeper—"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me." And surely, those who are listening are scratching their heads, wondering what in the world he could possibly mean. Surely he is not speaking literally. It's not a particularly easy or comfortable passage. The new truth that jumped out at me this time was what happens next. I don't think I noticed it before.

Many of his disciples said, "This is a difficult teaching: who can accept it?"

And Jesus asks, "does this offend you?"

And when he explains further—the account reads—and this is what struck me—what I never noticed before---"Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

Some would-be disciples made a choice that day. They decided to turn back. And Jesus asks the twelve: "Do you wish also to go away?"

It was a critical moment for him—for his mission—and for each one of them. Peter spoke for them: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Something very important is happening here, something critical to their identity as his men and women.

Thinking about this transported me back to one of the more uncomfortable afternoons of my life. I had completed the academic and ecclesiastical requirements for ordination. I had a job—a call. One hurdle remained. A committee of the Presbytery of which the little congregation that had called me to be their minister was a member, had to approve my fitness for ministry. That committee, as is often the case in our church, was carefully balanced theologically. Labels are not always helpful, but for the sake of description—two of the members of the committee could be defined as conservative evangelicals: this being the early 60's, two were social activists and more liberal theologically. They were friends of mine. The committee chair was a non-ideological moderate. When I arrived at the appointed place and time for the examination, I was surprised to discover that the moderate moderator and the two liberal social activists were not there, were not able to be there, I was told, with what seemed almost like glee. Furthermore, the staff person—my mentor and friend—in this context, maybe even my savior—was delayed. I was alone, in the hands and at the mercy of two, elderly conservative evangelicals and I was scared, and probably in a lot of trouble.

The conversation actually went alright. They were deferential, kind. And then the question focused on preaching—"What," they asked, "did I think the purpose of preaching was?" I gave a classic University of Chicago academic answer—something like, "to articulate the kerygma in the context of contemporary culture, drawing on the resources of theological and biblical history in a way that communicates existentially with the hearer in his or her life-situation." "Yes, yes," the elder of the two said and by far the more belligerently evangelical, "But John, do you preach for a decision?" I should have known better, of course, but I said, "No. Decision making is a private dynamic, the preserve of the individual in his/her autonomy and freedom. Preaching ought to respect that."

I was thinking, of course, of the times I had squirmed in a pew of the First Baptist Church where I attended BYPU with my friends and we would stay for prayer meeting and the occasional revival and the preacher engaged in what felt like emotional manipulation, trying every trick in the book to pry young people out of their seats and down the aisle to make a decision for Christ. In fact, I had gone down that aisle on several occasions; made several decisions. "No sir," I said, with conviction, "I don't do that."

"Well," he said, "then why in the world do you want to be a minister of the gospel?"

Somehow, I survived. We talked some more about what he meant by "decision" and what I did not mean and in time they satisfied themselves and let me through, although until they died I think they both regarded me as something of a pagan.

And the reason I am recalling all this is that I know now that they were right—not perhaps in the way they defined a decision for Christ—I still have trouble with that.

But they most certainly were right, I now know, that choice is the issue and that something critical about religion and also about who we are—is very much involved here.

"Choose this day whom you will serve," Joshua declares to God's people back on the edge of history. They have come a long way, out of Egyptian captivity, through the Red Sea and into the wilderness. Moses was long dead. Joshua had assumed the mantle of leadership as the people crossed the river into the promised land, fighting battles with the inhabitants at Jericho and other cities, dividing the land among the tribes. A whole generation has passed. Joshua is nearing the end of his life. And at Shechem the old covenant is renewed. God has decided to be their God. God will be faithful. Nothing they have done or ever will do will cause God to abandon them. But they must decide—who they will be. "Choose this day whom you will serve." Choose this day—who you will be. Choose this day to be God's people.

Choices. Jesus walked by Peter, Andrew, James John—fishing, mending nets and said, "follow me," and they had to make a choice. Later he asked them directly who they thought he was and again, a choice—"You are the Christ," Peter said—which means "We will be your people, your followers."

"To be or not to be: that is the question," Hamlet says. And that Shakespearean line, perhaps the most familiar line anyone ever wrote for the stage, contains an amazing idea—that an individual—that you and I—decide whether or not to be.

The late Paul Tillich, who spoke to and taught a whole generation of philosophers and theologians in the post-war era, wrote a very important book, *The Courage To Be.* Tillich's thinking was influenced by the rise of Nazism in his native Germany, and the quiet compliance of most German churches. Tillich, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw and were appalled at the ease with which German churches and German Christians found a way to capitulate to and ultimately support Nazi dogma. Bonhoeffer knew that the very soul of the German church—it's very identity as a Christian institution—was at stake. It was a time to make difficult choices. Bonhoeffer decided to stay and join the underground. Tillich and many others made an equally difficult decision—to leave homeland, culture, tradition, family—to go into exile. Tillich wrote, "The courage to be is the ethical act in which man affirms his own being." (p.3)

Tillich's student and friend, Rollo May, from the perspective of psychology, wrote about human choice and identity. "Acorns become oak trees and kittens become cats without choice, or an act of will. But," May wrote, "a man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices" (*The Courage to Create,* p.4/5)

Choose this day whom you will serve.

One of the most clever analyses of our culture I have read for sometime is David Brooks' popular new book, *Bobos in Paradise, The New Upper Class and How They Got There.*

Bobos is short for Bourgeois Bohemians, the two opposing streams of 20th century American culture that Brooks believes have now come together. You are a Bobo—"if you believe that spending $15,000 on a media center is vulgar, but that spending $15,000 on a slate shower stall is a sign that you are at one with the Zen-like rhythms of nature, or if your newly renovated kitchen looks like an aircraft hangar with plumbing, or if you will spend a little more for socially conscious tooth paste—the kind that doesn't actually kill germs, just asks them to leave, or if you work for a hip, software company where everybody comes to work in hiking boots and glacier glasses, as if a 400 foot wall of ice were about to come sliding through the parking lot."

In a chapter on Bobo Spirituality, Brooks argues that our culture focuses on spiritual experience rather than commitment to a specific notion of truth; that religious feelings and emotion are the thing. Bobos, he says, go to Montana a lot and try to figure out what Norman MacLean meant when he wrote, "Eventually all things merge into one and a river runs through it."

But beneath the popularized spirituality Brooks thinks there is a genuine longing for authenticity, for making strong decisions, for being what we most want and need to be. He quotes philosopher Richard Rorty: "The accumulation of spiritual peak experiences can become like a greedy person's accumulation of money. The more you get the more you hunger for more . . . But maybe what the soul hungers for is ultimately not a variety of interesting and moving insights but a single universal truth" (*Bobos in Paradise,* "Achieving our Country," p. 237). . . . Like God's eternal love—like "God so loved the world that he gave his only son," like "nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," like "Come, follow me—pick up your cross and follow me."

Choose this day whom you will serve. Who we are as men and women is a product of the choices we make. It is, in fact, a life-long process, not an event. "When did you decide for Christ," I have been asked and perhaps you have too. And the answer is that long before you and I made a decision, God made a deicison—to love us and care for us and to be our God forever. And that deciding to be God's man or woman is a process, choices made every day, in fact.

Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Cathedral Episcopal, San Francisco, writes wisely, "We all have to be born again, not once but many times, if we are to enter the kingdom. The Christian is always being born anew. There is a self within us aching to be born." (Alan Jones, *The Journey Beckons: Reflections on the Way of the Cross)*

And so the question for you and me this morning is precisely that—that self within us aching to be born; the longing for truth, the search for something to live for—the choices through which we become who we are and who God wants us to be—daily choices, routine choices: how to vote, how to spend money, how to invest resources, how to use time, whom to love, whom to commit my life to.

Sometimes the choices we make that establish who we are are public and political and economic, and sometimes they are deeply personal. To commit my life to another "for better or worse," to risk a new relationship, to end an old relationship, to begin a new venture, to leave a job and start again, to stay and work it out, to love a child, to stand up one day and declare my faith, and to join the church—not that I have it all together, or that I know all the theological niceties, not even that I totally understand—but I declare my intent to follow—to be Christ's man or woman.

Frederick Buechner wrote that our religion is about deeply felt passion, but more than that, passion that is harnessed. "The power that stirs the heart must become the power that stirs the hands and feet because it is the places your feet take you to and the work you find for your hands that finally proclaims who you are and who Christ is." (*A Room Called Remember,* p.147)

It is instructive to remember how little the Gospel story is about doctrine and religious experience and how much it is about making choices and then following. Jesus never once said believe ideas about me, nor—it is surprising to be reminded—never once did he say accept me in your heart as your personal Lord and Savior. What he did say—over and over—was "come, follow, go into the world, feed my sheep, love your neighbor."

One of the most intriguing, and as it turned out, important stories of theological struggle and religious conversion was C. S. Lewis's. Lewis was a distinguished literary scholar, author of many books and beloved children's stories, was not particularly religious. But mid-life he began to struggle with issues of belief and faith and life and decision. He wrote a book about it, *Surprised by Joy.*

> **"I was going up Headington Hill on the top of a bus. I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out . . . I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut . . . .I knew that to open the door . . . meant the incalculable . . . . I chose to open . . .I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt . . . .Enough had been thought, and said, and felt, and imagined. It was about time that something should be done."**

Like many of us here this morning, I suspect, C. S. Lews spent a life time on the margins of faith, toying with religion, wrestling with, thinking about the intellectual propositions of Christianity.

And like Lewis, perhaps the time has come to choose.

He wrote, "As the dry bones shook and came together in that dreadful valley of Ezekiel's so now a philosophical theorem, cerebrally entertained, began to stir and heave and throw off its gravecloths, and stood upright and became a living persona. I was to be allowed to play at philosophy no longer. . . .Total surrender, the absolute leap in the dark, were demanded."

(See Deborah Smith Douglas, "*C. S. Lewis and Our Longing for Home,*" in *Weavings,* July/August 2000)

Our identity as men and women is a product of our choices.

Choose—this day—whom you will serve.

Amen.

MORNING PRAYER OF THE PEOPLE
Sunday, August 27, 2000
The Reverend Sarah Jo Sarchet

O Holy God,
Your ways are mysterious, and always life-giving. You set choices before us, and with them also You offer us your incredible patience. Were we in your place, we would overrule the stubborn wills of rebellious children such as we. Were we in your place, we would turn the short-sighted creatures around us into servants of OUR will. Were we in your place, we would set this world/the office/our family,/this church straight in short order!

But You, O God, are not such a God as we would be. You could certainly fix the world and us with lightning-bolt decree. Instead, You lead with Your love, and You place Yourself in OUR place. You meet us here, and offer us choices again and again. You respect the great gift you gave us: our human condition, and you offer us an even greater gift: your forgiveness. Thank you for your gentler methods, for walking among us as Christ and fellow creature, revealing yourself as still, small, forgiving and renewing voice in the midst of the chaos we so comfortably and consistently choose and create. Thank you for setting the world straight in your own patient, life-giving way.

Help us approach you, O God, and choose to hear your voice above all others. Help us heed your invitation to personal repentance and the accompanying, blooming growth. Convict us of our self-seeking, and turn us to self-giving, that we might more consistently choose the fullness of life of your ways.

Help us also, Lord God, to see and pray for our neighbors. We know that you perceive their needs before we ask. You turn our asking into answers. From our prayers you forge our oneness with you and one another. So be with the homeless and the helpless, with the wanderer and the wondering. Be with the diseased and the depressed and the disabled, with the uncertain and the confused. Here now the prayers we offer in silence, as we lift the names and situations we carry with loving concern in our hearts:

Hear all of these our prayers, O Lord, and call us again and anew to allow our lives and your church to be touched and formed by the gentle hands and heart of your Holy Spirit. Turn us, receivers of your gracious love, into givers. Let us be good stewards of our neighbors needs, and help create a place for all in the Lord's house.

This we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen